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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Deceit and fraud in medical research — Education is the way forward

Dear Editor

I read with interest Jaffer and Cameron's article entitled "Deceit and fraud in medical research".¹ I agree with the authors that this is of significant prevalence and potentially widespread. The authors have elegantly presented the wide range of misconduct in what they called "potentially dubious practices in medical research". Such misconduct includes plagiarism, forging, cooking, trimming, misuse of statistical techniques, irresponsible authorship and redundant publication. However, it would be important for us to look at two important issues of dealing with misconduct in medical research; sanction and prevention.

When ethics fails, one must look to laws, regulations and institutional guidelines to establish and to enforce appropriate conducts. There are formal legal mechanisms which exist to protect innovative words, ideas and works such as copyright and patents. However, they are not used by most researchers because they are expensive and impractical in most circumstances. Although there are also other mechanisms which have been established by the various scientific bodies and national medical associations to respond to allegations of breaches of ethics in medical research, only very few countries have developed these mechanisms, and when they are, they have a very limited definition of misconduct. As a consequence, we have to rely heavily on the medical institutions employing the involved researcher(s) to have the primary responsibility for investigating

and for punishing the individual(s) for misconduct in medical research.

This leads to the second issue which is even more important, education. The aim of education is to prevent misconduct in medical research from happening. We need to educate the general public and the medical community about the importance of ethics in medical research. Medical leaders and editors of journals are the members of the medical community who are most directly involved in medical publication. It is, therefore, natural that they should be leaders in setting ethical standards for medical research. All medical researchers and trainees should be properly educated on the accepted norm in ethics of medical research.

The task of infusing ethics into everyone who conducts medical research is a formidable task. Only education could afford a realistic potential for sustainable change. Sanction should only be used when education fails.

Reference

1. Jaffer U, Cameron AEP. Deceit and fraud in medical research. *International Journal of Surgery*, 2006;4(2): 122–6.

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